

[Review] Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory, ed. (2015)
Emotions, politics and war

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Book review

Åhäll, Linda and Gregory, Thomas. 2015. *Emotions, Politics and War*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Reviewed by Synne L. Dyvik, University of Sussex.

War has been and remains one of the central concepts in International Relations' (IR). However, mainstream approaches are increasingly being challenged from IR scholars that trouble disembodied conceptions of war. These scholars, many of which are featured in *Emotions, Politics and War*, all urge IR to pay attention to people's experiences of war and to take seriously the role that emotions play in how we research war, conflict, and post-conflict settings.

This volume features 14 chapters as well as an introduction and a conclusion by the editors. Neta Crawford in her preface argues that 'emotions are constitutive of war and politics' (xviii), and through a wide range of historical and empirical cases, as well as through a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, this volume shows why this is true. Similarly, Åhäll and Gregory's overall claim – 'that we cannot make sense of war if we are unable or unwilling to pay attention to the sensual experiences of those affected' (2) – is, despite this great variety in approaches and focus, echoed throughout.

The introductory chapter gives the reader a brief, but very helpful primer to the concept of 'emotion' and its role in IR. It situates 'emotion' as a cultural, rather than a straightforward cognitive concept and surveys some important contributions from IR scholars drawing on psychology, sociology, neuroscience, feminist and queer theory. Following on from this, each chapter, while being conceptually and philosophically grounded discusses different empirical cases. The volume contains reflections on the relationship between materiality and discourse (Massumi, Solomon, Holland); on how emotions are negotiated during fieldwork or become integrated into research designs (Zalewski Jauhola, McDermott, Basham); on the emotional memorialisation of war in photography and exhibitions (Gregory, Guittet and Zevnik); on how emotions such as anger or compassion are disciplined in gendered ways (Parashar, Welland); on the emotional and psychological cost of war (Howell); on how humiliation as an emotion is a driving force of conflict (Fierke); as well as the many roles that grief plays in the aftermath of war (Parr, Hutchinson and Bleiker).

It is refreshing to read a volume in IR that takes peoples' varying emotions as their starting point. Negative feelings such as fear, anxiety, grief, humiliation, shame and guilt are dealt with, pierced by more positive sentiments of joy, excitement, and compassion. War is never here treated as a bracketed space, nor is it a neatly contained phenomenon. It is not something disjointed from the rest of human experience and agency. Rather, war here becomes a crucial part of people's lived experiences in a variety of ways, whether one is geographically close to war fighting or not.

Because of this, the volume does not operate with a precise and clinical definition of 'war'. It also resists clearly defining 'emotions' or 'politics'. For some readers, the lack of conceptual cohesion across chapters on these three key concepts might feel unsatisfactory, but to my mind the volume is richer for it. If anything, there could be

even more diversity, perhaps by drawing on scholarship from outside of the discipline of IR, or by exploring different ways of writing academically.

Emotions, politics and war contain some of the most interesting and thought provoking work on these themes within IR. As trinities go, this one is no less paradoxical than the one Clausewitz identified in *On War*. The editors want the collection to show ‘*how emotions function*, indeed what emotions *do*, in multiple and varied ways...as part of the research process, as part of shaping our understanding of “the political”, and as part of knowledge claims in IR and studies of war’ (225). In this the book is successful.

We are living through times when taking emotions seriously matter more than ever. Recent elections and referendums in the US and the UK have shown once again how peoples’ emotions are mobilised and manipulated for political gain. There are dangers attached to assuming that politics is disembodied and straightforwardly ‘rational’. As Crawford demonstrated in *The Passion of World Politics* more than a decade ago, IRs core theoretical frameworks take rationality for granted and if emotions are included, they are likely treated as unproblematic or uncontested. While this is still largely true, this volume goes a long way to respond to both of these challenges. For that and for so much more this is a welcome and very timely collection that should be of interest to anyone studying war and security, popular culture, international relations and political theory.